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INDULGENCES

BY THE
REV. JOHN PROCTER, O.P.



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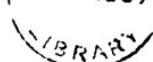
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INDULGENCES

BY THE REV. JOHN PROCTER, O.P.

FEW tenets of Catholic teaching have been more persistently misstated, few more consistently misunderstood by those who are "not of us," than the doctrine of indulgences, or, as they are called by earlier writers, *pardons*. Let us say at once that an indulgence does not mean the forgiveness of sin, much less does it mean permission to commit sin ; the former, *i.e.*, the pardon of sin, is given to those who are properly disposed to receive it by the two sacraments of baptism and penance ; the latter, *i.e.*, leave to commit sin, no Pope, no Church, not even God Himself could grant. *The Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, which is the religious text-book of the children in the Catholic schools, asks the question : "What is an indulgence ?" and the answer given is : "An indulgence is a remission of the temporal punishment which often remains due to sin after its guilt has been forgiven." An indulgence does not grant but pre-supposes the pardon of the guilt or malice or wickedness of sin ; it comes in "*after* the guilt has been forgiven." It does not take away, or

in any way touch or refer to, the eternal punishment due to every soul when, and as long as it has upon it the stain, or *macula*, of grievous or mortal sin. St. Thomas lays down clearly as the teaching of the Church that "indulgences are of no avail to those who are in actual grievous sin ; therefore it is (he adds) that in the granting of indulgences it is always stated that they are given upon the conditions of contrition and confession." The reason of this is, according to the Angelic Doctor, because "no man can have the penalty of sin remitted as long as he is in sin ; if he does not receive from God Himself the forgiveness of the sin, he cannot receive from God's minister the remission of the punishment due to the sin." An indulgence only professes to remit the debt of *temporal* punishment due to sin when the guilt of the sin has been already pardoned by God. A *plenary* indulgence means the remission, in its entirety, of all the temporal punishment incurred by the sinner ; a *partial* indulgence, the cancelling of a portion of such temporal pain ; an indulgence of forty or a hundred days would mean the remission of a penance or punishment of forty or a hundred days' duration, or its equivalent in this world or in the world of suffering beyond the grave. Even when the "wickedness of the sin," as David calls it, is forgiven by the love of a merciful Saviour, even when no guilt or malice remains, there are effects and consequences, debts and penalties, still remaining—the scars of wounds that have healed :

"Wounds of the soul, though healed, will ache,
The reddening scars remain, and make confession ;
Lost innocence returns no more,
We are not what we were before transgression."

For the elucidation of the vexed question of indulgences, three questions should be clearly understood : (1) the meaning of temporal punishment ; (2) the discipline of the early Christian Church, or the system of canonical penances which prevailed in the early Christian centuries ; (3) the significance of the term, "the treasury of the Church," as used by Catholic theologians.

I. The Meaning of Temporal Punishment.

Every time a man deliberately sins, he offends against God's law ; that offence implies guilt, the guilt calls for punishment. As we say that "virtue is its own reward," so may we sometimes say that "sin is its own punishment"—sometimes, but not always. If it does not bring its own punishment, punishment must be inflicted as reparation for the sin, either voluntarily by the culprit or by some external authority, whether human or divine. A glutton often suffers physical pain as a consequence of his sin, an impure man incurs bodily and mental shame, an angry man feels when his anger has passed self-humiliation and degradation. Other sins, although they bring with them none of these visible or tangible consequences, inherit temporal suffering as a penalty for their evil doing. This

penalty must be paid. We leave God by self-love or from love of pleasure ; we must make amends to Him by self-humiliation and penance.

This is the explanation of the hard, rude penances of the Saints—the breast of St. Jerome wounded by the bruising with a hard stone, the scourgings of St. Dominic, the voluntary solitude of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Mary of Egypt, and the furrowed cheeks of St. Peter, the effect of his scalding tears. This is the meaning of the penitential seasons of the Church—Lent, Advent, vigils and the rest. Even though we may have repented of sin, we owe this reparation to God.

A mother pardons her child, but she punishes it for its sin. A friend forgives his erring friend, but he expects satisfaction at his hand. The law pardons the felon, but not till he has expiated his crime. God in like manner forgives His penitent child, but He demands punishment for his sin. David had sinned ; he had been guilty of a two-fold sin ; Nathan the prophet makes him realize his sin : “I have sinned against the Lord.” David repented his wrong-doing, and God pardoned his guilt : “The Lord hath taken away thy sin, thou shalt not die.” Yet, though God had forgiven the sin, the debt of temporal punishment must be paid : “Nevertheless . . . the child that is born unto thee shall surely die . . . and it came to pass on the seventh day the child died.” The sin of Adam and Eve again exemplifies the doctrine of temporal punishment.

They sinned ; they repented ; they admitted the wrong they had done. God pardoned them ; yet the debt of temporal punishment remained. "Cursed is the earth in thy work," God said to Adam ; "with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof . . . thorns and thistles it shall bring forth unto thee." Then to Eve God said : "I will multiply thy sorrows . . . in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children . . . thou shalt be under thy husband's power." Now if God had removed this "curse" entirely from Adam, it would have been what we understand by a "plenary indulgence" ; if He had relieved him of it for forty days, it would have been a "forty days' indulgence." If a criminal is imprisoned for life, and his sentence is then remitted by the sovereign, it is a human plenary indulgence ; if he is sentenced to spend three years in gaol and at the end of a year receives a free pardon, it is a two years' indulgence. If the Church grants an indulgence, *i.e.*, a remission of all or part or the debt of temporal punishment due to forgiven sin, it is through the merits of Jesus Christ, and by virtue of the power which He committed to her : "All power is given to Me in heaven and on earth, and as the Father hath sent Me (with all power), so do I send you" (Matt. xxviii. 18 ; John xx. 21). "To thee do I give the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xvi. 19 ; John xx. 23). "Whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven." If God has given to the Church power to forgive sin, we can hardly wonder if she claims the

lesser power as included in the greater, the power of remitting the penalty of sin—in other words, the power to grant indulgences upon conditions of certain good works being performed.

II. The Discipline of the Early Church.

In the early ages of the Church when the “zeal of God’s house consumed them,” knowing the need of penance and satisfaction for sin, the Church often-times, in the person of her ministers, gave external and public penance for external and public sins. These penances were given sometimes for life, sometimes for a stated term of years, sometimes for a fixed number of days. The number of days or years over which the penance extended depended generally upon the gravity of the sin, or the greatness of the scandal given. Sometimes it was, as we have said, given for the entire life of the penitent, sometimes for forty days, at other times for three, seven, or ten years. The penitent undergoing his expiatory penance had to fast, and abstain, and refrain from amusements, and to spend his time in prayer and good works. Now we come to our object lesson in the meaning of indulgences in those days. An indulgence, in the language of the Church, was the equivalent to an amnesty in the language of men. As St. Basil says : “He who has the power of binding and loosening can lessen the time of penance to the truly contrite.” At particular times, therefore—as, for instance, when a persecution was imminent,

or when a Christian under penance showed extraordinary sign of sorrow, or when he was in danger of death, or at the prayer of a martyr in prison, or on the occasion of an episcopal visitation—the Church would relax these penances: that was an indulgence. If a life-penance was remitted, it was a plenary indulgence; if less than that, it was a partial indulgence of forty days, three, seven, or ten years, as the case might be. An indulgence was then, as it is now, often granted conditionally upon some good work or works being performed—fasting, prayer, pilgrimage, or almsdeeds. Spiritual favours were not as “pearls thrown before swine”; they were offered to the contrite, who had to prove their sorrow by their willingness to do some service for God or their fellow-men in return.

III. The Treasury of the Church.

Now that the discipline of public penances no longer prevails in the Church's system, an indulgence means the remission of the whole or part of the temporal penalty due to forgiven sin as seen by God, though invisible to men. Applied to the souls in Purgatory an indulgence is granted by way of suffrage. The Church cannot enter Purgatory and free the captive souls from the prison-house of the great King; she has no real and direct jurisdiction over Purgatory; she is the Church militant on earth. But this she can do, and this she does: she can entreat of God, by virtue of the merits of the Divine

Blood-shedding, and of the virtues of her Saints, to remit a portion, or the whole, of the pains of the suffering dead, and can apply to them the Divine merits and the good works of her Saints to deliver them from their house of bondage, and bid them enter into the promised land. St. Thomas makes a clear distinction between an indulgence granted to the living and an indulgence applied to the dead. In the one case the living man performs a good work which is prescribed, such as visiting a shrine ; when he has done that work in a proper spirit, with a contrite heart, and in dispositions that are good, he gains the promised indulgence. A soul in Purgatory, on the other hand, cannot do that good work—it can no longer merit, its time of sowing and reaping is at an end ; but the Church on earth merits for that soul, offers to God the merits of her holy children, and asks the Most High to apply them to the soul or souls for whom she pleads. “A prelate cannot by his own will deliver souls from Purgatory,” he cannot absolve a soul from the *punishment* even of sin when it has left the bodily prison ; but he can ask God to do so in the Church’s name, and to apply to them what the Saint calls “the common merits upon which indulgences rest.”

By the “common merits” the Angelic Doctor understands what we have called the “treasury of the Church,” or what may be termed, in twentieth-century words, “the Church’s spiritual bank.” In

another place the same learned doctor explains the meaning of this expression. There is a mystical unity in the Church, which is "the body of Christ." One member helps another, as the hand helps the foot, and the foot the head ; one can satisfy for the other ; the merits of one can be applied to the other. Some holy ones of God more than satisfy the debt of temporal punishment which they owe to the Eternal Father ; some suffer with patience troubles and trials which they do not deserve ; others perform works of supererogation which God's justice does not demand of them ; then there are the superabundant merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. All these "satisfactions," these merits, these uncalled-for penances, are not lost, nor are they useless and in vain. They form a spiritual treasure-house, a "bank" we have called it, upon which the Church can draw for the benefit of her needy children ; for "these treasures," the Saint adds, "are the common property of the Church, and as they belong to the multitude (of the faithful), they are distributed to individuals amongst them according to individual need." St. Paul added his quota to this accumulation of spiritual treasures, to be drawn upon by the Church for her children in their hour of need : "I, Paul . . . now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ in my flesh, *for His Body, which is the Church.*" Saints without number have contributed spiritual gifts, innocent children who

have suffered though they have never known sin, stainless virgins who have carried their baptismal robe unsullied before the judgement seat of Jesus Christ, martyrs who have undergone torments beyond the power of words to describe, confessors who have kept themselves "unspotted from this world" and yet have spent their life in labour and penitential toil. All these merits, virtues, good works, which they required not for themselves, are in the power of the universal Mother, who applies them to her children in need—to those on earth, giving them by virtue of the power of the keys, to those in need in the unseen world, applying them by means of suffrage or prayer, begging of the Almighty Father to hear her prayer by virtue of the merits and prayers of her children, whether living or dead. In granting indulgences the Church on earth gives to her weak children some of the super-abundance of the spiritually wealthy, from this storehouse in the keeping of the Eternal Father in Heaven.

The necessity of making satisfaction for sin, the need we are under of doing penance even for sin that has been pardoned, and the fact that we incur a debt of temporal punishment for our wrong-doing was clearly the teaching of the early Church even in the earliest times. That we share with each other in mutual merits, by virtue of the Communion of Saints, is another doctrine which forms an article

of the earliest Creed. That these temporal punishments may be cancelled by legitimate authority either in part or in their entirety was a point upon which the Christian writers in the years of the Church's infancy laid particular stress. In his *Development of Christian Doctrine*, Cardinal Newman quotes from several of the early Saints to prove this : "If the sinner spare not himself, he will be spared by God"; "Let him lie in sackcloth, and by the austerity of his life make amends for his past pleasures"; "As we have sinned greatly, let us weep greatly . . . the repentance must not fall short of the offence"; "Take heed to thyself that, in proportion to the fault, thou admit restoration from the remedy"; "The necessity of the purifying discipline is such that, if it does not take place in this life, it must after death, and is then to be effected by fire, not by a destructive, but a discriminating fire, fire pervading the soul which passes through it." These are words attributed respectively to St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Cyprian, St. Basil, and St. Clement of Alexandria. Tertullian wrote a special treatise on the subject, exhorting the faithful to do penance for sin as a means of escaping hell fire, and instancing Nabuchadonosor, king of Babylon, who "offered to the Lord the sacrifice of repentance, fulfilling the work of confession in the filthiness of seven years, with his nails growing wild after the manner of an eagle's, and his unkempt hair wearing the roughness of a lion.

O horrid treatment ! Him at whom men shuddered God received.” St. Cyprian writes : “ In full council assembled we determined, not only by our common consent, but with terrors added, that the brethren should do penance, and that no one should hastily grant peace to those who did not penance” ; and he inveighs in strong language against those who take pains “ that sins be not expiated by due satisfaction, that would not be washed clean by tears.” St. Pacian wrote “ the Parœnesis, an exhortation to penance, which is full of beautiful and suggestive thoughts, all bearing upon the necessity of satisfaction for sin committed and forgiven, now or hereafter, unless the satisfaction be remitted. He speaks of those who, having duly confessed and laid bare their crimes, either know not of, or refuse, the remedies of penance and the very acts belonging to the ministry of confession.” He says: “ What will be the punishment of those who either do no penance or neglect it, and who die, therefore, in their wound and imposthumes ? And what again will be their crown, and what their reward, who purge the stains of their conscience by right and regular confession ? ” He upbraids “ those who, having committed crimes, refuse penance ” ; who “ are timid after being shameless, modest after sinning ; who blush not to sin, yet blush to confess . . . who come to the hands of the priest, who come in the sight of angels, with the confidence of innocence ; who insult the divine patience.” “ Rejoice,

O sinner," he exclaims, "if in this life thou art cut off by death, or wasted by sickness, that thou be not punished in the life to come." "What then shall I, the priest, do now who am compelled to cure?" he asks. "If there is any one of you who can bear to be cut and cauterized, I still can do it. Behold the knife of the prophet: 'Turn unto the Lord your God with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart.' Fear not this cutting, most beloved. David bore it. . . . He who had once been accustomed to gems and to purple hid his soul in fasting; he whom seas, whom woods, whom streams served . . . wasted in floods of tears those eyes with which he had beheld the glory of God. . . . The King of Babylon performed penance, forsaken of all. . . . Behold the cutting which I promised! Whoso shall be able to endure it shall be healed. I will yet apply fire from the cautery of the Apostle. Let us see whether you can bear it. 'I have judged,' he says, 'when ye were gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Where is the destruction of your flesh? What say ye, penitents?"

One of the most pernicious of the many heresies broached in the sixteenth century, whether in England, Germany, or Switzerland, was that of the denial of the necessity of penance and personal

satisfaction for sin. The plea that Christ suffered for all, and that, therefore, we need not suffer, was only the expression of a self-indulgence, a sensual license which rebelled against the words of Jesus Christ : " Do penance, or you shall all likewise perish," and the other words of the Master : " If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." From Genesis to the Apocalypse, from apostolic writers to the spiritual writers of our own time, there is one continuous and continued clear and unequivocal call to penance running through the whole of the Church's teaching. Either do penance or die. Deny yourself if you would live. Make up what is wanting on your part to the sufferings of Christ, if you would have part in Christ's redemption.

This is the teaching of the Catholic Church from the first century to the twentieth. If in this world we omit penance, it will await us in the world beyond the grave. There is only one other hope —a spiritual amnesty, a free pardon, a remission of the debt. This the Church can grant to those who are duly prepared to receive it, by virtue of the promise of Christ, the power of the keys, the virtues of her sainted children, and above all and in all, through the supereminent and superabundant merits of Jesus Christ. " We believe," in the words of St. Cyprian, " that the merits of the martyrs can do much with the just Judge." We believe that

out of their superabundance our deficiency and the deficiencies of others may be supplied, that they may help us here and in Purgatory, now and hereafter. We believe that the Church has ever held this as part of her Creed, and that, as she remitted the canonical penances in favour of our brethren in the early days, she can remit their equivalent to us, who are her children now. We believe that as St. Paul decreed punishment upon the incestuous Corinthian "for the destruction of his flesh, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord," and then, afterwards, lest he should be "swallowed up by over much sorrow," forgave him "in the person of Christ," so can the Church do for us. In a word, we believe in the power of indulgences to remit, not guilt, not sin, not eternal pain, but temporal punishment, which we know is due even to forgiven sin.

The doctrine of indulgences gives us a high and exalted idea of God, His justice and His mercy ; far from being, as some would have it, an incentive to sin, it is on the contrary, a deterrent influence, showing to us the gravity of sin, to which punishment is attached even when the malice has been pardoned.

If at any time the power of indulgences has been abused, no one repudiates and condemns that abuse more than the Church herself. The sins of a child, or of children, must not be imputed to the mother, unless the sins are committed at the suggestion, the

instigation, or with the connivance of the mother. If she warns her children, and tries to withhold them from sin ; if she threatens them with penalties if they give way to sin ; if she anathematizes the sin when committed, and exhorts the sinning one to repentance and amendment, surely she is guiltless of the sin. So has it ever been with the Catholic Church. She teaches that it would be simony to sell or traffic in holy things. Nothing sacred may be sold for money. Simon Magus was taught this lesson by a bitter and painful experience. Yet, alas ! since Christ was sold for silver, men have been found selling Christian gifts for gold. A glance at the English newspapers will show the systematic trading that is carried on in church livings, and advowsons, or presentations to vacant benefices in the English Church. If anything of the kind has ever been done in the Catholic Church, it has been done against the knowledge, or at least against the will of the Church. She has protested against it, and has removed the scandal, whenever it has been in her power to do so. But the just and proper use of indulgences she has ever upheld, and still upholds, as a legacy of Christ our Lord to His earthly and suffering children.

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